

Mayor Celso Lobregat yesterday urged for a review of cargo shipping rules and regulations hinting that loopholes in the policies make the illegal trade of marine species including other illegal goods possible.

The mayor made the recommendation during the Senate inquiry on the controversial black corral smuggling initiated by the Committee on environment headed by Senator Miguel Zubiri yesterday morning. He was invited to the inquiry to help shed light on the fact finding efforts related to the issue.

Lobregat cited the procedures in shipping cargoes—from the time it is loaded in container vans and sealed and shipped to other ports—which he said bear many loopholes, making shipment of illegal goods possible.

The mayor over the last 3 days joined officials from the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) and other concerned agencies during fact finding efforts related to the illegal trade of marine products in identified warehouses in the city.

The Li and Lim firm owned by Olivia Li, with warehouses in Barangay San Roque was identified as the origin of the P35 million worth of black corals and other marine products seized in Manila last month.

BFAR officials headed by National Director Asis Perez and other concerned authorities in cooperation with Mayor Lobregat conducted coordinative meetings and inspections at the identified warehouse located in a building owned by Yuscom of Mr. Benny Yu in San Roque. In an earlier inspection at the warehouse Saturday morning, the fact finding team found traces of black corral and turtle carcasses. However, at night time, per voluntary information from Mr. Yu, the team discovered some 30-40 tons of corals and shells and other marine species stuffed in sacks and concealed at the back of the Yuscom compound.

Authorities disclose that the products extracted in other areas and brought into the city through the backdoor little by little after which they are loaded into vans in volumes and sent to Manila or Cebu with fictitious declaration of cargoes.

As this developed, Senate Committee chair Sen. Zubiri said the Senate is set to come up with remedial regulations to correct the flaws. He said his committee also received suggestions for the review and investigation of current shipping practices of sending empty vans to consigners.

Under the present practice, consigners are given the liberty to load cargoes—legal or illegal, into vans and then seal them with protections from the Trade Secrecy Laws.

The senate inquiry yesterday also tackled other issues related to the black corral smuggling such as the business permit of Ms. Li, the role of the consigner and the shipping company in the illegal trade and other matters.

The committee is set to meet again on Wednesday to continue the inquiry. — Sheila Covarrubias

## Senate inquiry on black coral smuggling: Celso cites flaws in cargo shipping rules

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